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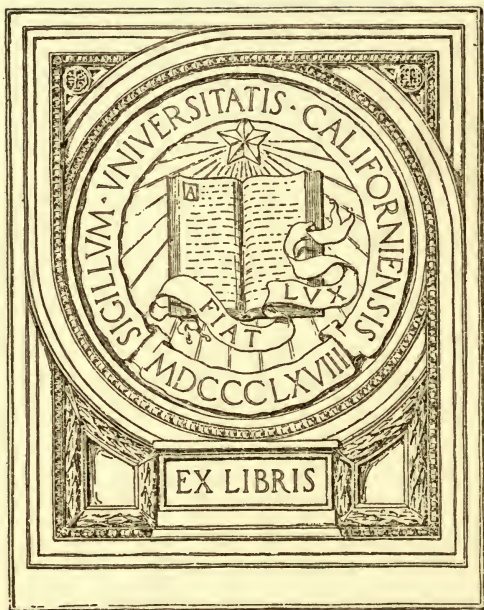
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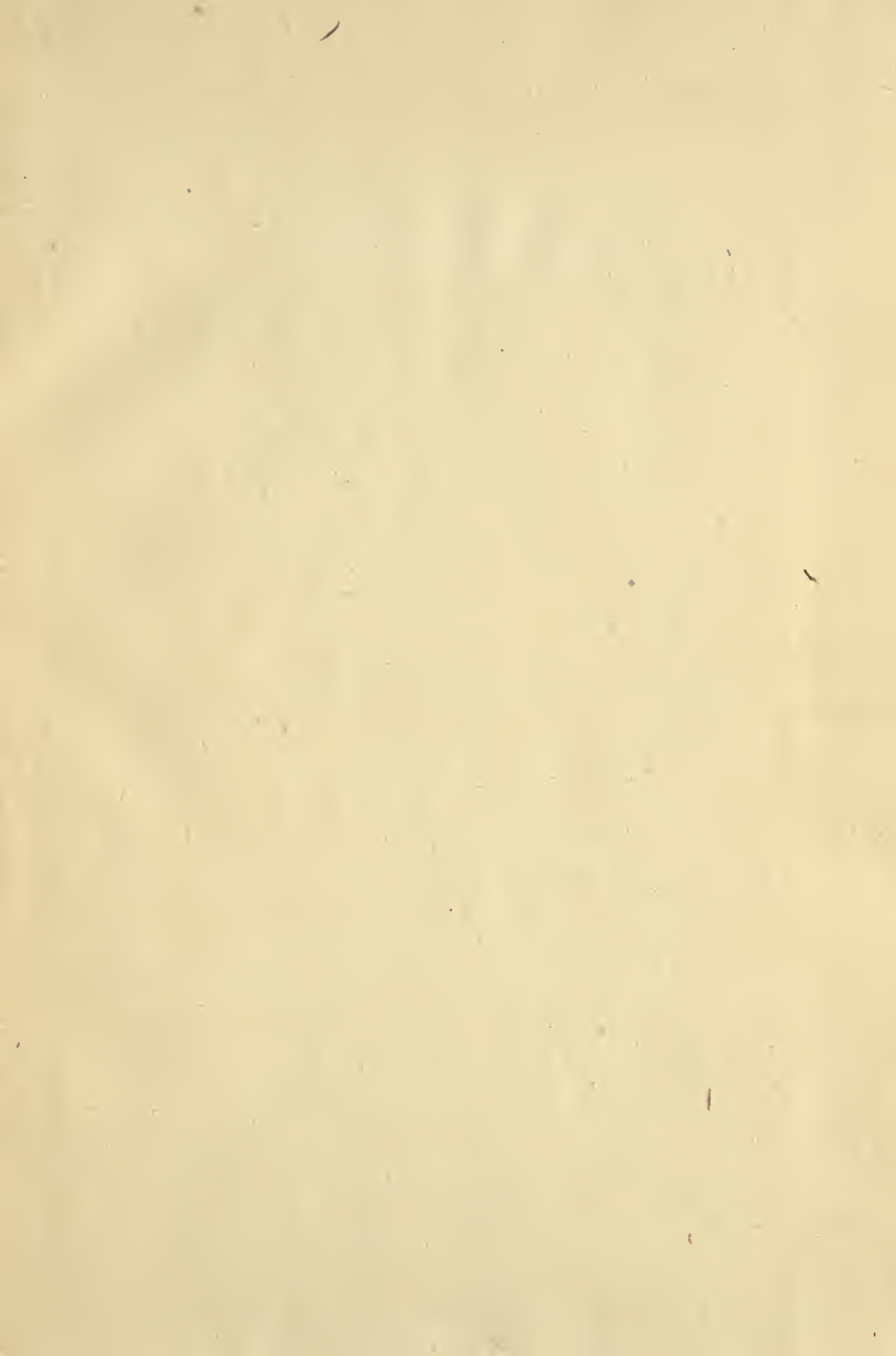
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Orrick Johns

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Black Branches

A BOOK OF POEMS AND PLAYS

By

ORRICK JOHNS

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Dedication--Portrait

DEDICATION—PORTRAIT.

The asters wave
in the viridescent pattern
of your being here.
The lights deepened by gay awnings
rest aimlessly with drooping arms
on wide white armchairs.
The ringing of bells
draws faint echoes
from the well-dressed sides of the chaina,
nestling in leaves.
In the winter
the lakes of your country
reflect thin flames,
the fingers of trees
touch lightly your white and blue fabrics.
The brown fields
of restrained laughter
are dotted with the white teeth
of the snow.

Over your plains fly birds
unexpected . . .
You assort the days and the nights
in your cabinets
with languid intelligence.
Improbably you touch the old beard of Truth
until the unwilling mouth
grows eloquent.
Little do you know
or care to know
of his past.

You have seen too many torrents disappear,
you have seen too much smoke ascend . . .
You know better than any one
the irregular ways
of your desire;
you would have no new architect
in the narrow streets,
with their crooked little boxes,
where grow
the flowers of destiny.

No less than wine are you made
of imagination.
What can the sun do
but ripen you
who have no desire for ripening.
Distillation shall follow distillation;
and in the end
you shall be tasted
by wind and shadow
by the slow look of exiles.

Pleasure is essential. . .
". . . Can you not figure to yourself
the folly of other people?"
When I stand here
looking down at the polished ribbon
of the river you have crossed
for the last time,
I do not know that I am unwilling
to drop all the petals
of reality.



Three Plays in Chiaroscuro

SHADOW

ECLIPSE

LUMIERE

To Grace

SHADOW

A Play In One Act

The three old sisters are faded and exquisite. The first sister, with a palette and brush, stands before an easel. The second sister lies motionless on a couch, draped over with gray. The third sister is seated on a wide chair behind the couch. Her hands are folded in her lap. Behind the three sisters rises a very large, broad window. Beyond is a garden, indistinct in the still dusk.

The Third Sister

My hands I have folded and refolded
for forty years. . . .
My heart sings
because it has no gestures.

The First Sister

We who have had this window
know what it is
to look with the eyes,
hear
with the ears,
accept
with the brain.

The Third Sister

We who have had these walls
know what it is
seeing,
to be blind. . . .
hearing,

to be deaf. . . .
accepting,
to be dumb.

The Second Sister

I have baked five thousand and thirty
loaves of bread.

(*They pause for her to continue, and then—*)

The Third Sister

That which we are not unproved
in the meditation of,
we dare not discuss
in the intrusion
of this inquisitive window.

The First Sister

I have been
with abounding grace
those things that are called:
aunt, cousin,
grand aunt,
daughter, grand daughter, niece,
and sister. . . .

I shall curtsey
unto the first Father, and say:
"dear relative!"

The Third Sister

Our property is in things
that do not cry
with pain,
and are not silent
through joy.

The First Sister

It is conceivable
for many to think
that it is because no one
required it of us. . . .
when in reality it has happened
that we required it of no one.

The Third Sister

If the will alone is a scholar
the histories of others
are written upon me.

The First Sister

I have seen twelve magnificent cats
male and female
die without a moan.

The Third Sister

It is no small thing
to have escaped
many absurdities.

The Second Sister

The table must be moved
from the wall
before the winter. . . .

The First Sister

(After a long pause, to Third Sister)
I have heard your feet, Sister,
passing my door
like poems in the dark.

The Third Sister

There *are* terrors
in the presence of which
we are fearless.

The First Sister

The sorrow that is long
and comes slowly,
is no sorrow at the last. . . .
It has dropped its miracles,
as it grew heavy
with indolence.

The Third Sister

Once I came in the night
to break this window. . . .
But I awoke.
I did not dare after all
to let the dark in.

The First Sister

It was that time, Sister,
that your feet
sounded like poems.

The Third Sister

Do you think
that for some merciless whim,
we dressed for the ball
too early?

The First Sister

There is a beauty

that knows. . . .

and a beauty that does not know.

The Third Sister

My thoughts of other times

visit me like ambassadors,

grown old.

The Second Sister

Have you had the gardener

kill the worms

in the peaches?

The First Sister

(*To the Second Sister*)

The table has already been moved, Sister,
for the winter.

The Second Sister

You have not yet opened the window. . .

It is pressing inward. . . .

I have noticed it

more and more each year.

The First Sister

There is no window. . . .

only the unaccustomedness to space. . . .

The Third Sister

Space

is a tiny bubble

growing in my brain.

The First Sister

To the keepers of the potential

it is enjoined to be
responsible,
considerate,
comely. . . .
Should any of those
whom I have imprisoned go forth,
they will be observant
of these qualities.

The Third Sister

One grooms the hair
as though in the presence of many
waiting to be heard.

The Second Sister

Why am I strong now
when I cannot stir?

The First Sister

(After a pause, to Third Sister)

Our mother left us quickly
babbling of our wickedness. . . .
she could never wait
for our father.

The Third Sister

Is it strange
that I did not know our father?

The First Sister

He was much away
occupied, as he was,
with his double property
Honour and Patience.

The Third Sister

That I would remember,
knowing how I grew. . . .
but I am no longer afraid
of the mirrors of my reality,
though I tremble sometimes
standing in powerful darkness.

The First Sister

Neither the flames of the sun
nor the black snows
of the night
are hospitable to us.

The Third Sister

There are persons who take
an interest in stories. . . .
Do you believe
there are stories?

The First Sister

I have memorized
the writings of men. . . .
I prefer
the long, active silence of lamps.

The Third Sister

My nieces always knew
the gifts I had chosen for them. . . .
I attached
great importance to these matters.

The First Sister

A child is appetite
unclouded by design.

The Third Sister

A child munches
without discrimination
the bread of our agony
and of our peace.

The First Sister

There is a notoriety of barrenness,
nevertheless,
unknown to multiples.

The Third Sister

. . . bearing its heraldry of race
in the very absence
of testimony.

The First Sister

The treasures of denial survive
like empty chalices in alluvia.

The Third Sister

How can one be certain whether
the greatness of desire
is not also a barred door?

The First Sister

I fled once crying
from the colors I had laid on my canvas.

The Third Sister

I have awakened frightened
from the immensity
of a vagrant dream.

The First Sister

The reticences of refusal are naked

as autumn branches.

(She lays down her palette, elaborately. . . and passing across to a small table, speaks—)

It is the time.

The Third Sister

(With interest only languid)

It is too soon.

The First Sister

(returning toward the coach with a small wine-glass, filled, she leans over the head reclining there, and quickly draws back)

It is . . . too late.

The Third Sister

(She rises . . . she is agitated, somewhat at first as a birch may be agitated, by a evening wind. She looks with a certain helpless concern upon the stillness that has come over the form upon the couch . . . this concern translates itself into a formal sinking upon her knees beside it, a final childish surrender to tenderness as she presses over it, hiding her troubled face among the stillness. After a time she looks up to see the even profile of the First Sister, turned away from her, from the face beneath hers, showing thought that is too far within or too far without to be involved at once in what has happened. The Third Sister rises as she speaks.)

When she was ill I went away with her.

I was not then as little younger
than she as now . . .

And you . . . did not return.

The First Sister

(Her even bearing, incapable of a note awry, is reflected
in a voice cold and smooth.)

When at last I came,

You could not go . . .

It would not have been permissible
that we had not loved her.

The Third Sister

It . . . would not have been permissible . . . ?

The First Sister

that we had not loved her . . .

The Third Sister

(Finding in the aesthetic a refuge.)

She is beautiful now . . . as

thistledown. Have you
looked again?

The First Sister

What can the eyes say
of that upon which they have worn keen?

The Third Sister

We did not love her?

The First Sister

I have painted men and women

as one would paint oranges

one was forbidden to taste . . .

Her colors were imperceptible
in the screen of my emotion.

The Third Sister

(She comes around the couch, drawing closer to the

First Sister, shaken by some new inexorable solitude.)

I shall tremble . . .

I shall be too weary . . .

I shall scarcely stand . . .

The First Sister

(Something has touched her voice, her face too, her less rigid figure—some instinct of the gregarious.)

You . . . loved her?

The Third Sister

A negation made her
the companion of my humility.

The First Sister

We . . . loved her?

The Third Sister

Our lives loved her.

The First Sister

Death . . . centers the divergent shadows
in a spot of light.

The Third Sister

Illumination

was not willingly her discovery
as it was with us . . .
you remember?

The First Sister

Hush . . .

Remembrance has foregone
the dissolute pastime
of speaking loudly.

The Third Sister

(The room perhaps has been lightened. Or a last ray of the sun has somehow found her face. Her voice is eager.)

It is less difficult
for two to hear,
than for three.

The First Sister

It is less distant for two
to return than for three.

The Third Sister

Sister!

The First Sister

Sister!

(They put out both hands. The curtain hides them.)

Eclipse

ECLIPSE

A Play In One Act

Five men are seated on lumps of clay under the rim of the enemy side of a deserted shell crater. From time to time the cloudy night sky is lighted by a dim, brief glow. Death comes without other indication. The men have been there for an eternity. Their mud-soaked clothing and ruined equipment and soiled flesh have assumed a color like that of the bank which protects them. Occasionally, however, the light is sufficient for this or that characteristic face to be seen.

The Poet

My gluttony is affected
by the taste of skin-baked tobacco
qualified by exudation . . .
To smoke is to practice auto-cannibalism.
(*He lights a cigarette*)

The Beggar

(*To The Personage*)

Did you rent your estate
to a large widower with seven children?

The Personage

How can I remember?
It is a heap of ruin
inhabited by lizards of peace . . .

The Boy

There is no more ammunition.

The Poet

Four kilometres from my normal mind

I struck the fancy
of a flute-playing Viennese.

The Personage

I recall . . .

He muttered some syllables
affecting the technique of his dispatching.

The Beggar

His disciplinary values
are bayonnetted.

The Poet

His philosophy henceforth will stink
or bring forth orchids,
as the case may be.

The Beggar

Have you a doubt of my actual desire
to consume flesh?

The Boy

There is no food.

The Poet

Hunger is the child of idleness
which begets men also . . .
I was born with an inheritance
of hunger and of thirst.

The Personage

You can go on talking . . .
They haven't found the range yet.

The Silent One

(*He sits always with his head in his two hands, looking*

far off at the ground between his feet)

I was a professional optimist . . .

My face wore thin with grimaces . . .

It took me a long time

to become sober.

The Poet

We are like paper flames under glass

or something

in a museum.

The Personage

The music I heard all night

was the laughter of those

who have nothing to do.

The Beggar

Have you touched silk

in your sleep?

The Boy

She had skin the color of blood and khaki

or this foreign mud

the second day after rain . . .

She showed her two teeth . . .

It's damned funny she should be

the last woman for me to see

on earth.

The Beggar

I have asked God for two yards

of this soil.

It is the first begging I have done

here . . .

Did you know I used to live in luxury?
I only went out to beg on fine days.

The Poet

'There was a verse and a melody . . .
Both are bloody now.
It is strange how the arts
harbor relentlessness.

The Boy

He said that we might stop
if we wanted to . . .
Suppose we had . . .

The Poet

There were four crosses
on that first hill.

The Beggar

A fellow lay with a hand and foot
at each.
He looked so good
Bill stuck him there
with his own mucilage.

The Poet

I presuppose nothing
about the end of my flesh,
having known nothing of its beginning . . .
It fascinates me like a young puppy.

The Beggar

I used to stand under a bridge, begging . . .
Men of my class avoided rain . . .
I could hear

the feet of the people
over my head . . .
That sort of thing, I said once,
was over for me,
but . . . it has just begun.

The Boy

You won't hear anything . . .
My father was a philosopher in his way.

The Beggar

Her fat eyes were cross-hatched
about the lids . . .
Lord, how she knew me!

The Personage

They do not babble in the books

The Beggar

And yet
they have babbled
for nine thousand years.

The Poet

I feel the essences of great tales
unfolded . . .
My interest was ever
in passing things.

The Personage

It's a curious pity
the way some of them went
that first week.

The Poet

Pity is a melody

only the stars have written . . .
Will anyone know that I lie
embalmed in frozen thought?

The Personage

The willing of grotesqueries
is the business of commanders . . .
I was demoted twice.

The Beggar

One learns to descend even three times three.
I was only a European beggar—
now I am a soldier without glory.

The Personage

We are, you see, each of us,
something that is left from many . . .
I, for instance,
am thirty-seven ghosts.

The Poet

My means of expression are diminished
in the manner of a capon,
or a dumb parrot . . .
May my buttocks be seasoned well
for these hospitable birds . . .
One that flew low yesterday,
a very insistent public indeed,
has promised himself
the perusal of me,
in a leisure moment.

The Personage

A chap once, long ago,

had a coat here he brought along . . .

It smelled like dog's hair . . .

It kept me awake with happiness . . .

(He totters)

Ah . . . I fancy I have it now . . .

(He slumps down quietly and rolls out flat. The others shrink against the wall and stare at him in silence—)

The Poet

They say he knew so many men

in both worlds,

one half of his memory

was already immortal.

The Boy

He was like a damned lieutenant

looking at you . . .

I'm full of holes from him.

The Poet

In the theatre of the dead each arrives

having spoken his prologue

to a hostile audience.

The Beggar

(breaks off from humming a tune, a common tune once sung to rum-shop words)

I sing because my belly quivers

with the vibration . . .

Hunger departs, being outdone

by passion.

The Poet

(Musing)

I kept my soul spotless under Caesar,
I was not made a slave by courts . . .
And now I have no more gestures
than old Bill's severed hand.

The Beggar

It was like a woman's broken fan . . .

The Boy

There were only two of us,
my father and me.
I've forgotten what we talked about . . .
But I remember many things . . .
these we didn't talk about.

The Beggar

I was once in that state of damnation,
called employment . . .
Back and forth we went,
with those shovels of sand . . .
Four steps forward you fill . . .
four steps backward, you—
(*He stops gutterally in the middle of his speech and
drops back, almost comfortably, on the cushion of clods*)

The Boy

Ah hell . . .
that was rotten of It.

The Poet

(*He stands over the body, shaken, for a moment, then
looks up*)
The proposals of indignant politicians
made him, the blithiest of men,

and my comrade,
a tragic philosopher.
He has existed to satisfy
the maw of history . . .
I too am a comedian.

The Boy

I never belonged here . . .
I have too many fathers.
My own father and I
were occupied together at many things . . .
now, I should be older than he.

The Poet

The public, my sole heir,
cannot know the testamentary disposition
I have made of its pleasures . . .
If they would count yesterday's dead,
it would be seen
that I spiked my poems neatly . . .

The Boy

They haven't sent any orders
since we took this hole.

The Poet

Soldiers without orders
are like girls without rivalry . . .
All my songs are sung . . .
(*He crosses the stage and looks over the top of the hole*)

The Boy

Careful . . .
I should rather your nonsense

outlived me.

The Poet

Hush . . . I am thinking
of the odor of wet lawns in summer . . .

Do you believe
they will ever count the dead?
(*He tumbles across the ledge*)

The Silent One

(*He rises and goes to the body*)
His songs are counted.

The Boy

(*He seats himself, his last strength departed from voice
and body*)
Are we all gone now?

The Silent One

Yes, we're all gone.

The Boy

It's a clean wipe?

The Silent One

Clean.

The Boy

(*In a faint voice*)

Could you . . . kiss me here?
My father did that even until . . .
well . . . it seems a long time ago.

(*He stretches along the ground at the base of the wall.
The Silent One stumbles toward him and leans over the
face. He returns to the parapet and begins to climb.
As he reaches the top, and spreads forth his hands, there*

is a bright glare, then the stage is blotted out completely by darkness)

Curtain.

Lumiere

LUMIERE

A Play In One Act

The sky is a blue bowl with stars. The effect is of immense space. The two seated figures, a man and a girl, are dressed as though they had come from a summer party—the man coatless. They sit toward the front and left of the stage, on two raised bits of earth or rock. Otherwise the ground is absolutely flat, to the horizon, without a tree. The faces of the two are suffused with starlight, but not too clearly seen.

She

Do you like it here?

It is prison . . . isn't it?

He

No . . . Yes.

The walls will go back soon . . .

we must wait, it only seems so now.

She

How can it seem? Seeming . . . is!

He

It is? See . . .

the walls are going back.

She

It is prison.

He

Shall I sing something?

She

No, the tunes are all gone out . . .

you cannot light them.

He

Yes, they are smothered . . .

Is it cold there?

She

I should not mind the cold,

if only I could feel it . . .

One cannot feel anything in prisons.

He

I thought I saw

the winking of a humorous star.

She

O, let me look . . . You saw it, then?

He

There . . . I thought I saw . . .

She

It has gone . . . Does everything go?

He

Everything . . . that comes.

Don't you feel the walls going back?

She

I'm not thinking of that . . .

How far away are you?

He

It only seems so far . . .

She

But if it seems . . . !

He

Yes, I am far away.

She

I suppose one does not really
grow tired of prisons . . . only
of one's self.

We could run . . . round and round.

He

Or think . . . round and round.

Or not think.

She

What is thinking?

Is it what I am doing now?

He

What are you doing now?

She

My arms respond . . . clasping nothing.

He

That is thinking . . . only
it is not what I meant.

She

Now I know . . .

It is prison,
but it is not what we meant.

He

Yes, it is not what we meant . . .
it only will be what we meant . . .
it only may be what we meant.

(The figure of a man passes across the stage behind them, walking slowly)

She

Who is that one?

He is not in our prison.

He

No . . . He is in another one.

She

Did you recognize him?

He

Yes,

his certitude was immaculate,
he was never waiting for anything.

She

He is in our prison . . .
there are others in our prison.

He

I grant it may seem
there are others in our prison . . .
then, it is not our prison.

She

You think it is not?

He

Did you feel the walls going back?

She

I thought I felt . . .

(The figure of a woman passes through. She is fashion-

ably dressed, carrying a parasol. She turns for an instant to throw a quick glance at the man, before going off stage)

It is more ominous . . . I saw her lips.
they were like a thin blade . . .
and her hair was heavy and dark,
like storm clouds . . .
though I do not quite remember *their* shape.

He

Yes, her heart was like a storm cloud . . .
She could move like angry water.

She

She too, then,
she is in our prison.

He

It is her prison . . .
the prison of one is the prison of all . . .
Have you any flowers left?

She

I threw them away before the door closed . . .
I thought
they would die.

He

They would have died . . .
Nothing could live here, I think,
unless the walls go back.

She

How can you think?
I do not yet know what thinking is?

He

Do you remember
when thought was like many roads . . . ?
It is the continuity of walls
that makes a prison.

She

Flowers could not live here . . .

He

It is the continuity of living
that makes flowers.

She

It is dark.

He

There is no wind.

She

There is not even a tree.

He

Or a sound.

She

Do you remember frogs?

He

Almost . . .

She

I saw the moon once . . .

it was like a cup, poured out . . .

*(A tall man passes, a tall student, who gazes straight
ahead of him. She speaks tremulously, with excitement)*

That one was he . . .

I saw him plainly.
He is not in our prison.
That one was like a tree
stripped bare, for winter . . .
I felt his breath, smelling of pines.
I remember . . .

He (spitefully)
Remembering is without continuity . . .
It falls through the hands . . .
Are your hands full?

She
My hands lie in my lap . . .
the veins are big and blue,
it is dark under the veins
as if the sun had set behind them . . .
they sleep like a little village.

He (sententiously)
I was whispering to myself not long ago . . .
"I am going perhaps, to a little village."

She
You can go, then?

He
Yes, I can go.

She
You do not feel the walls?

He
I only seem to.

She
The walls are hard . . .

or I would go all the way to morning,
no matter how far . . .
Do you think morning will be?

He

Morning will be.
That has already been thought of . . .
It began when continuity began . . .
Morning will be.

She

But we shall not know it?

He

Not unless the walls go back.
But you . . . do not believe.

She

How does one know that one believes?

He

Believe has not the acquaintance of know.
Once . . . you believed.

She

Then the walls were so far
one could not see them?

He

There were no walls.

She

It is hard to believe that . . .
there were no walls . . .

He

Light came between . . .

dissolving as it did
one conflict in another . . .
We drank the walls in light.

She
Do you remember that?

He
I remember everything, but not now . . .
not at one time.

She
Is tomorrow remembering?

He
Remembering is the petal
of continuity . . .
But we have forgotten.
*(A man comes in and stops. He spreads his arms over
their heads towards the sky. He throws a kiss to the
morning star. He goes out somewhat disconcerted, slowly
and thoughtfully)*

She
That one stopped . . .
he seemed to be trying to touch the walls . . .
Perhaps he has pushed them back.

He
No, he is a wall.
He is a wall against walls.

She
He has gone . . .
Did you feel any change with his coming?

He

I do not feel . . .

It is a starvation in the presence of bread.

She

I hunger . . .

The walls seem to have come closer.

(A group of figures, men and women, pass across the stage chatting gaily or seriously, as is their mood, in dumb show.)

There are so many . . .

those we have seen,

and these that just passed.

Who are they all?

He

They are the others . . .

One does not think of them ordinarily . . .

Sometimes they are printed on the mind,
as a woman is printed on a burnished door
when she passes.

They divide in the imagination
into many atoms.

She

Our prison will not hold so many . . .

perhaps the walls will go back.

He

The walls are going back . . .

but there are none in our prison.

It may be that our prison is in many.

She

Are you laughing now?

How can you remember laughter?

He

Because I am laughing.

She

Where are you laughing?

He

Up there . . .

I am flying and laughing.

She

Up there? I do not see . . .

I see only the walls.

He

My plumage is gray . . .

One must wait.

She (very softly)

You . . . believe?

He

Yes . . . I believe.

She

How can you believe?

He

Because I am laughing.

She

How can you laugh?

He

I believe.

She

You believe?

He

I believe.

She

Tell me both sides of it.

He

I believe.

She

Is that all?

He

That is all.

She

That you believe?

He

That I believe.

(On this last speech he has risen. There seems to be more light. Perhaps the stars, having been patient, are now given up to gaiety. He and She walk apart, holding out their hands as though feeling for something, as blind men do.)

She

There are no walls!

He

Yes, there were no walls.

(They turn and face each other, trembling with a new elation, which gradually is diminishing the space between them.)

I am feeling . . . without starvation.

(He turns to her eagerly)

Can you dance?

She

No, I cannot dance now . . .

There . . . is no ground, is there?

We must wait . . . perhaps I shall try.

(There is no need to wait, the dance takes her willy-nilly, her feet without her knowledge responding to unheard music. He follows her. They stop, embracing)

She

It is morning . . . there will be dark.

He

(Laughing gaily)

There will be dark . . . that has been thought of.

It began, when continuity began.

Curtain.

Songs of Deliverance

SONGS OF DELIVERANCE

To Bob Minor

THE SONG OF YOUTH

This is the song of youth,
This is the cause of myself;
I knew my father well and he was a fool,
Therefore will I have my own foot in the path before
 I take a step;
I will go only into new lands,
And I will walk on no plank-walks.
The horses of my family are wind-broken,
And the dogs are old,
And the guns rusty;
I will make me a new bow from an ash-tree,
And cut up the homestead into arrows.

Behold how people stand around!
(there are always crowds of people standing around,
Whose legs have no knees)—
While the engineers put up steel work . . .
Is it something to catch the sunlight,
Jewelry and gew-gaw?
I have no time to wait for them to build bridges for me;
Where awful the gap seems stretching there is no gap,
Leaping I take it at once from a thought to a thought.
I can no more walk in the stride of other men
Than be father of their children.

My treasure lured like a bright star,
And I went to it young and desirous.
Lo, as it stood there in its great chests,

The wise men came up with the keys,
Crying, "Blasphemy, blasphemy!"
For I had broken the locks . . .
And when the procession went waving to a funeral,
They cried it again;
For I stayed in my home and spoke truth about the dead.

Much did I learn waiting in my youth;
At the door of a great man I waited on one foot and
then on the other.

The files passed in and out before me to the antechamber,
for at that door I was not favored:

(O costly préferment!)

Yet I watched them coming and going,
And I learned the great man by heart from the stories
on their faces.

When presently the retainers arrived, one above the other
in a row, saying:

"The great man is ready,"

I had long been a greater than he.

This is the reason for myself:

When I used to go in the races, I had but one prayer,

And I went first before the judges, saying:

"Give everyone a distance, such as you consider best; .

I will run scratch."

NO PREY AM I

No prey am I of poor thought.

I leave all of my followers; I tire quickly of them;

I send them away from me when they ask too much;

for though I live alone

Still will I live, night and day . . .

There is not anything in me save mutation and laughter;
My laughter is like a sword,
Like the piston-rod that defies oceans and grades.
When I labor it is the song of battle in the broad noon;
For behold the muscles of a man—

They are piston-rods; they are cranes, hydraulic presses,
powder-magazines:

But though my body be as beautiful as a hill crowned
with flowers

I will despise it and make it obey me . . .

Is the old love dead?

Then I shall await the new,

To embrace it more sturdily and passionately than ever
the old;

And break it under the white force of my laughter

Until it lies passive in my arms.

There is nothing in me but renewal;

If my friend bow his head over me I soon surprise him
with shouts of joy;

For in an instant I am again what I was,

Only with a few moments more of the infusion of Earth;

I tell him, the griever, to follow me and he is a griever
no more;

He raises his head and must follow.

Yet it is my battle, not his battle,

For in me I absorb others . . .

I hail parties and partisans from afar;

Not men but parties are my comrades,

Not persons but nations are my associates.

I shake the hand of nations;

For I am a nation and a party, and majorities do not

elect me—

I elect myself.

I swam in the sea, and lo!

The continents assembled like islands off my coast.

My talk is with Homer and Bonaparte, with David and
Garibaldi, with China and Pharaoh and Texas;

When I laugh it is with Lucifer and Rabelais.

A pathfinder is my mistress, one hard to keep and
unbridled,

I have no respect for tame women.

My friends and I do not meet every day,

For we are centuries apart, our salutations girdle the
globe.

I have eaten locusts with Jeremiah;

I invite all hatreds and the stings of little creatures,

They enrich me, I glory in my parasites.

No man shall ever read me,

For I bring about in a gesture what they cannot fathom
in a life;

Yet I tell Bob and Harry and Bill—

It costs me nothing to be kind;

If I am a generous adversary, be not deceived, neither
be devoted—

It is because I despise you.

Yet if any man claim to be my peer I shall meet him,

For that man has an insolence that I like;

I am beholden to him.

I know the lightning when I see it,

And the toad when I see it . . .

I warn all pretenders.

Yet before I came it was known of me to the chosen, all

that I should do.

Every tree knew it;

Every lion and every leech knew it—

And called out to meet the new enemy,

The new friend . . .

What power can deny me?

It was known that I should do not one thing but hundreds,

For I despise my works and make them obey me.

I have my time and I bide it . . .

It was known that I should turn no whit from my end
until I had attained it.

Nothing has scathed me,

Nothing ever, nor ever will.

I have touched pitch, I have revelled in it and rolled in it;

Buried in mire and filth, I laughed long,

And sprang up.

I have loved lust and vain deviltries

And taken them into my heart—

Their dirt and their lies—and my heart was aflame

With a new fancy . . .

Not me can pitch defile!

For the Spring, my sister, rose under my feet

And I was again naked and white,

Ready to dive into the deep pool, green and bottomless,

The medium for heroes, since it is dangerous and
beautiful—

The pool of To-morrow!

It is because I breathe like fishes and live in the waters
of To-morrow that Death fears me . . .

How often I have intercepted thee, O Death!

O windy Liar!

Thou canst do nothing against me;
If I command thee to stand back thou art afraid and
 cowerest,
For I have caught thee often and punished thee . . .

I am the greastest laughter of all,
Greater than the sun and the oak-tree,
Than the frog and Appollo;
I laugh all day long!
I laugh at Death, I hail Death, I kiss her on the cheek
 as a lover his bride,
But the lover goes not to his bride unless he desire her;
I go not to Death until I am ready.
The strong lover goes not to his bride until he would
 people his land with sons,
Then I too, I go not to Death, except it be for the labor
 greater than all others.
I shall break her with my laughter;
I shall complete her . . .
Only then shall Death be when I die!

Tunings

TUNINGS

To Alfred Kreymborg

Fingers I've ten fingers
Very much admired,
I shall frame them
For they cannot do anything;
They cannot earn dinner
Or even hold a pebble . . .
Pebbles are pretty falling through them.

*Shoe-
string* Little old shoe,
You need a shoe-string;
I shall find one for you,
For without it you are helpless
As a man who studies regulations,
But with a yellow one
Like a woman who is bald.

Moon We had one moon . . .
You took it for a baby
And when it cried
For a bib and a bottle,
All was over.

Miggles Miggles—
That was his name,
Everyone always said,
"Miggles did it."
O, Miggles,
I admired you from the beginning,
Miggles!

A Room It is a room that sets people thinking,
So they say,
Lighted like grandma's moonflowers . . .
Swish . . . I hear something in the corner,
Suddenly,
And I wish I were a cat.

Blue Under-shirts Blue undershirts,
Upon a line,
It is not necessary to say to you
Anything about it—
What they do,
What they might do . . . blue undershirts.

At the Door I have only a tingling remembrance
Not of his eyes
But of
A dandelion . . .
Nevertheless,
The whole of him,
The whole of me,
There—
Known, elicited, understood.

On the table Little duck
Made of plaster,
With your head
Upon a spring,
When my hand trembles upon the table
You nod,
And when I chuckle too . . .
Such understanding,
C'est *enaurme!*

Beautiful Oh, beautiful mind,
Mind I lost it
In a lot of frying pans
And calendars and carpets
And beer bottles . . .
Oh, my beautiful mind!

New Songs of Deliverance

NEW SONGS OF DELIVERANCE

To the Whip-poor-wills

THE POPLARS

Three poplars I have watched
A long time now in the west wind
Which blows here always.
Three poplars close together that lean in the wind . . .
And I have never seen them touch each other.
So my brothers, my good brothers,
With whom by the chance of fortune
I have lived,
Let us lean to the stern fate
All one way if you like . . .
But let us not touch.

ONE STRING

O song, song . . .
O untenable song,
On the string of the harp
I have heard you make the sweetest music!

EPITOME

What is but a small thing
Will have the changelessness of marble, too,
The bent twig is a matter of direction only . . .
It seems to me
When I have heard the first speech of a child
I have seen the whole time
Of a man on earth.
There is interpretation
In a gesture in the darkness,
And a bird will have one feather erect always
Like a flag.

THE DOG

Scored and bleeding was the ear of that dog,
Helpless was one foot.
And how he stood even more unmoved
Thereafter!
How he annoyed sleep
More than ever with the perception of his task;
How he waited, half fallen
By the door,
And sounded joy-trumpets
For the next coming of his enemy!

THE LITTLE FLOWERS

I am not smiling
Beside this mound—
For a long time now I have forgotten to smile
At the wrecked and beaten ruin
Of so many a proud-facaded thought . . .
But I watch the little flowers
Growing from it—
Gravely I watch the little indomitable flowers
Putting their heads up.
Thrusting out their fingers to the sun.

CRYSALIS

They have piled one thing after another upon me,
Until I am buried;
They have placed shadow upon shadow
And over the top with my own cowardly hands
I have laid a roof.

Perhaps it will be a long time before I grow
To break from my house
As a boy bursts his coats,
And drop it about me . . .

What a falling of curious shadows there will be.
Shadows that I cannot linger with,
Shadows of the past
Like beggars that I shall not speak to.

PATHS

Many a one will go down those paths
Where the wild ivy grows venomous,
And the rope vines shake in the wind
And the tall chestnuts make the light dim—
Many a one who will never know
That Greece and all her wars
Could not outcry
The crying memories of those branches
The troubled pity of those stolid trunks.

RETURN

Come then, all my dreams,
Come back and be at home . . .
See, like the flame between the logs,
You will take life again.
You will creep higher and higher!
O wounded one,
O you of bitter love,
O you who were too great and angular
For courts,
O you who could not ever speak
So full was your desire . . .
Come then undiminished, all my dreams,
Come back and be at home!

Kysen

KYSEN

A Frieze

I

The gods have taken a child from the womb of a dead lady.

The father has sacrificed five bullocks for the child in the womb during three days following the intense heat.

Twenty stores of grain have been turned out along the roads for the poor, and forty wells have been sunk between Wul and Tanaio.

The rains have fallen for a day upon the ashes of the mother, but the infant Kysen thrives upon the black breast of a Nubian, whose first-born was thrown from the rock.

II

In the center of the circular pool before the house of Kysen's father facing the alley of poplars and the little valley beyond, stands a tiny girl-child of marble holding in her hands a wounded bird.

Sometimes the sun robes it in a transparent gown of silver, reflected from the basin at its feet.

The sculptor Tamaporis modeled it from Kysen's very self, and she, who is forbidden to do so because she is stately and silent in her father's house, longs to take the child down from its pedestal and question it regarding their future.

But at night she goes out from the house in her tunic of shimmery white, with the fringe of peacock colored silk, and wading through the pool she climbs upon the rim of the basin and kisses the little limbs and the hands, for the sake of all the things she does not wish to remember.

III

Every morning for seven mornings, Kysen has risen from her chocolate, taken behind the lattice of her verandah, and binding her hair in a knot over her brow and donning her double chiton of pale blue, embroidered with gold and modena phoenixes, has gone among the rose-bushes to watch for the first bud.

It is understood that until the labors of the Spring have borne this fruit, her lover may not return.

This morning on the smallest bush three steps from the olive tree a spot of red no larger than a jewel pushed out of the green cloak, and Kysen has gone to the East window at the top of her house, spreading her arms in welcome. At night a rocket will be sent up from the terrace.

IV

When Kysen awakes in the night and sees the big wings of the window open beside her bed she shudders, for she imagines they are the arms of a monster come to carry her away.

And when she hears the sound of the dry branches in the wind outside she imagines it is the voice of the monster calling her to come.

Then she turns to awaken her lover.

But if he is not there she throws back the purple rugs and the white covers of the bed and goes to the chamber where the parroquets hang, and lifting the black silk night-shade with the pink monogram, she chatters to them until she falls asleep in her chair.

V

When the red cat is ill it is as though the sea has escaped through a hole in one of the continents and the maid whose business it is to care for it stands before the shrine of Ptah, trying to pull her fingers out of their sockets.

All the doors of the house close more noisily than usual and the gold-fish die before they can be eaten.

But Kysen has prepared for this and in a far chamber of the house she has ordered a table to be laden with twenty kinds of fruit and the rarest wines from each province, delicate tongues of the baby calves, and the skins of quails roasted between honey.

When her friends are assembled the doors are locked and Kysen feasts and makes merry until the red cat is well.

VI

Once a year at dawn the priest comes from the temple to the house of Kysen.

He is tall and his robe is of apple-color with a yellow band around the ankles and he has been chosen because he has the longest beard of all the young men.

He walks back and forth in front of the door, watching the casement of her sleeping apartment.

As soon as it is closed he enters and pressing his lips upon the clasps of her feet and upon her hair, he demands the name of her lover.

She pouts and refuses to answer, and though she would keep him longer pleading with her, he goes away.

Kysen watches the reflection of the window upon the round pounce-box of gold upon her table, and calling the score and five of maids she orders them to bar the doors and windows, to wear soiled linen and never to admit anyone again.

As for herself she has a bed of coarse sand made in her room and sleeps upon it until her skin stings with pain and is so rough that it must be embrocated for thirty-one days before her lover is allowed to return.

VII

On the tenth day after the birth of a child in her household Kysen prays for the things she can never have:

"Father of Smiles, Forgiver, I have read in a crimson doe-skin book with silver sprays and an orange enamel clasp, of a bird in Africa which the Tunisians call buhabibi, meaning the bird of laughter and which eats grain from the tongue without being trained.

"In the palace of the Zuwya Sheik, who is said to be always on horseback shaded by a green umbrella, bearing a falcon on a tiny cushion and followed by a greyhound, there is a shawl of silk like sunset passing through the branches of the palms.

"Give me both of these, Father, and let thy daughter have many children, but let them be born from my kisses as sound is born from the wind and let them come into the world fully clothed in tunics of blue."

VIII

Today there passed along the road ten men with iron collars about their necks and chains between them, and either side a file of young soldiers.

Kysen, without even waiting for the completion of her toilet and with her hair flowing behind her like a fan of bronze, ran out of the house and addressed the dark-skinned captain of the soldiers: "Give these men to me that I may free them! Are they barbarians or Lydians that you put iron weights upon their necks and fasten them together with chains?"

And the captain answered: "Kysen of the province of Wul, each of them has committed a murder by binding the hair of a maiden about her throat."

And Kysen replied: "It is a thing that has happened since the beginning of the world, and men know that none but the gods can take life, for none but they can give it. The gods have brought death to the ten maidens by making these youths their instruments."

Hearing Kysen speak thus the soldiers nodded to each other as though they had gained a new knowledge, and the men in chains drew themselves up and laughed.

But the captain ordered the column to go on, and because she could not prevail Kysen has placed a man upon the road to herald the approach of misery caused by the law.

She will hide her head beneath four thicknesses of ostrich down and fill her ears with scented gums in order not to know the sound of injustice.

IX

The little girl from the village whose parents gave her all the tasks to do in order that they might not lose a moment from their wine, has been brought into the house of Kysen to learn the art of laughter.

When the offenses of the child, whose name is called Dikai, have filled the red sheet kept by the secretaries, Kysen goes into the chamber of porphyry in which seven candles are kept burning day and night, and administers punishment to herself for the acts of Dikai, being careful that no member of the household should see the manner of her punishment.

When she has finished she gathers the tears which she has shed in a silver bowl, and pours them into the closed amphora upon which is written, "The Dowry of Dikai." Then summoning the maids she orders forty lashes to be administered to the lintels of the great south door, and instructs them to give the child greater freedom than before, and to obey her in all her desires.

X

At the dance of the Cow, which is sacred to the poor, Kysen wears the calyx of a poppy inverted, and her limbs are bound with cords woven of the tongues of serpents dried upon weights and treated with oil.

Her mask is made of ivory scraped thinner than the fibers of an orange, and two children carry the crystal alms-bowl, containing the figures of boys modelled in wax of Hymettus.

Her hair is powdered with the ashes of young men who have died for her love.

When she returns to her house, before laying the garments away she will press her lips upon all the soiled places for the sake of the gentle fingers of beggars.

Hedone

HEDONE

To Hugh Ferriss

PROLEGOMENON

I greet the skill of those cool hands,
their chisel and the graver's breath
wherefrom my fashioning understands
life in dissentient death.

O touch precise and personal
that carves these lapidescent spheres,
this soundless breast make beautiful
with its impassioned years.

Shadows immonde and lines volupt
set forth in thy incautious art . . .
such vice that flowered and that supped
nightly with my hard heart.

Spare not . . . in laminate relief,
unmoved by ghibbeline and guelph,
laconic and eternal grief
cut boldly here myself.

SANGFROID

No pierrots come here khaki-clad
nor warlike flutterings feminine,
but fatidique and slightly mad
thought-children frail and thin.

Ripostes and pregnant raillery drift
through sorrow phases demi-sane . . .
Voicelessly they wait the lift
bring up some new refrain.

The terraces and balcon lie
unvibrate in the dripping moon
save where the glint of clasping thigh
or laughter breaks the swoon.

AMAZON

Up-rythming from the groined arch
her navel flower is a cup;
the spiral flexing of her march
shuttles to calf and crup.

From stride to swifter stride and run
the ivory, sheatheless, cabrioled,
then quick beneath a stroke of sun
Swayed like a vine of gold.

SALON DES VERS

The little verses seek their meal . . .

O chef appointed, glut these aches!
and from the noon of wine and cakes,
lo, fed to fullness, let them steal
into the dusk to violate
in verbal corybantic daze
each one his slim and guarded phrase
or line most dimply celibate.

RESEMBLANCE

Would you be varied as the moon
were I to poison grown entire;
were I thus bringing gown and shoon
of hate embroiled upon desire,

were I such ambivalent veil
to slip upon the torsal vase
of this your body slim and stale
Anubis of aseptic days?

Lemurent god upon my cross,
en cueros vivos, delirante,
would I reminded of some loss
murmur a name like yours, Amante?

In any bed cacoethine
where you in pervious candor spread
the essences of high cuisine,
would I be dead . . . would I be dead ?

Londlouper I, désenchanté . . .
in railway tunnels move me still!
Ah, unintrigued, how once we lay
enpullmanned . . . frail ambrosophyl!

These improved lots . . . O rose-tiled floor . . .
so nourished face . . . O porous boon!
However, when I pass the door
shall you be varied as the moon?

VIVIPAROUS

'Tis the crusade of bagatelle,
and down the heights, á corps perdu,
have fallen since the matin bell
small Choris and Kwei-foo.

Their laugh the thirty centuries
have sought to hush with fumes of bhang
and incense from the mysteries
whence wicked temples sprang.

Above the morning's horizon
a single cloud floats lightly blue . . .
To Choris this is TO KALON,
a fragrance to Kwei-foo.

Still undisintegrated, Kwei
and impious Choris ravish nude
the shady waters of Hei-hei
blown by the gales of mood.

PIETY

The daedal queen edulcorate
strove with her sleepiness at tea;
Theos, attending lounged and ate
the crumbs of social apathy.

The envious pom unwound and leaped
upon the god's wide, hairy lap,
sniffing the breezes that were steeped
with odors from her mistress' nap.

Soon the celestial bard is stirred,
he strikes in pianissimo
notes the Calypsine victims heard
out of the sea's mouth long ago.

The sleeper turns . . . upon her throat
the slow blood stipples through the down,
her fingers as in dream afloat
drift to the nipples in her gown.

FIERTE

Imrudent yielder, guard thou still,
durante beneplacito,
the rage that draws the sea-tide's will,
thy retrogressive no.

Complacent dragons haul thy car,
and fantoccini cieline,
eyed by the yellow-barred cougar
who feeds upon my spleen.

In regal bass the old ædiles
praise, through the damask of thy nights
the prescience of elate denials,
the innocence of rites.

LUNETTE

The window flames no longer clamber
like gonfanons against the sky,
and faintly blue-green glows the camber
of her thigh.

The febrile radiance left of day
creeps through the forest of her passion,
and riant in the dusk I stay
a man of fashion . . .

Her cigarette, avid of design,
is one still spark by shadow pressed,
and like a moon beneath, benign,
glimmers her breast.

INVITATION

Idonean lemur, sport with me
beneath the amber cyprilune,
where roll in onomotope
the rumbles of maroon.

O Clovic shaft, these lobes await
the splitting glaive, inappetent . . .
O shadow-eyes aculeate,
return, relume, resent!

SAMAHDI

At first thy soul is such a gate
as carved the cinquecento master,
its suave increase exfoliate
with rich volute and mince pilaster.

No ideal rapture struggles there . . .
yet do the inward heats remain
that forged it, and the acier
impassive tonic of disdain.

USURY

Treasure I aught beneath the stars
to scorn thy soul's ihlang-ihlang . . .
Have I some yet crescent bars
no other suitor learned or sang?

These searching fingers unashamed,
sweet with the ink that blots the sun,
are they not tigers loosed and tamed
to fright thee, guest of Babylon?

My tangled hairs and anguished jaws
above thee loom like riddled flags,
storming beyond the menopause
to whitened Hylotheic crags.

Thou shalt fall back, the knotted loins
of thought are pressing on unbound!
the pillars and the deep-lunged groins
of reticence are flung to ground.

Yet for thy love's ihlang-ihlang
these fiery flanks obey, are still;
and the uncivilized mustang
of beauty sleeps . . . it is thy will.

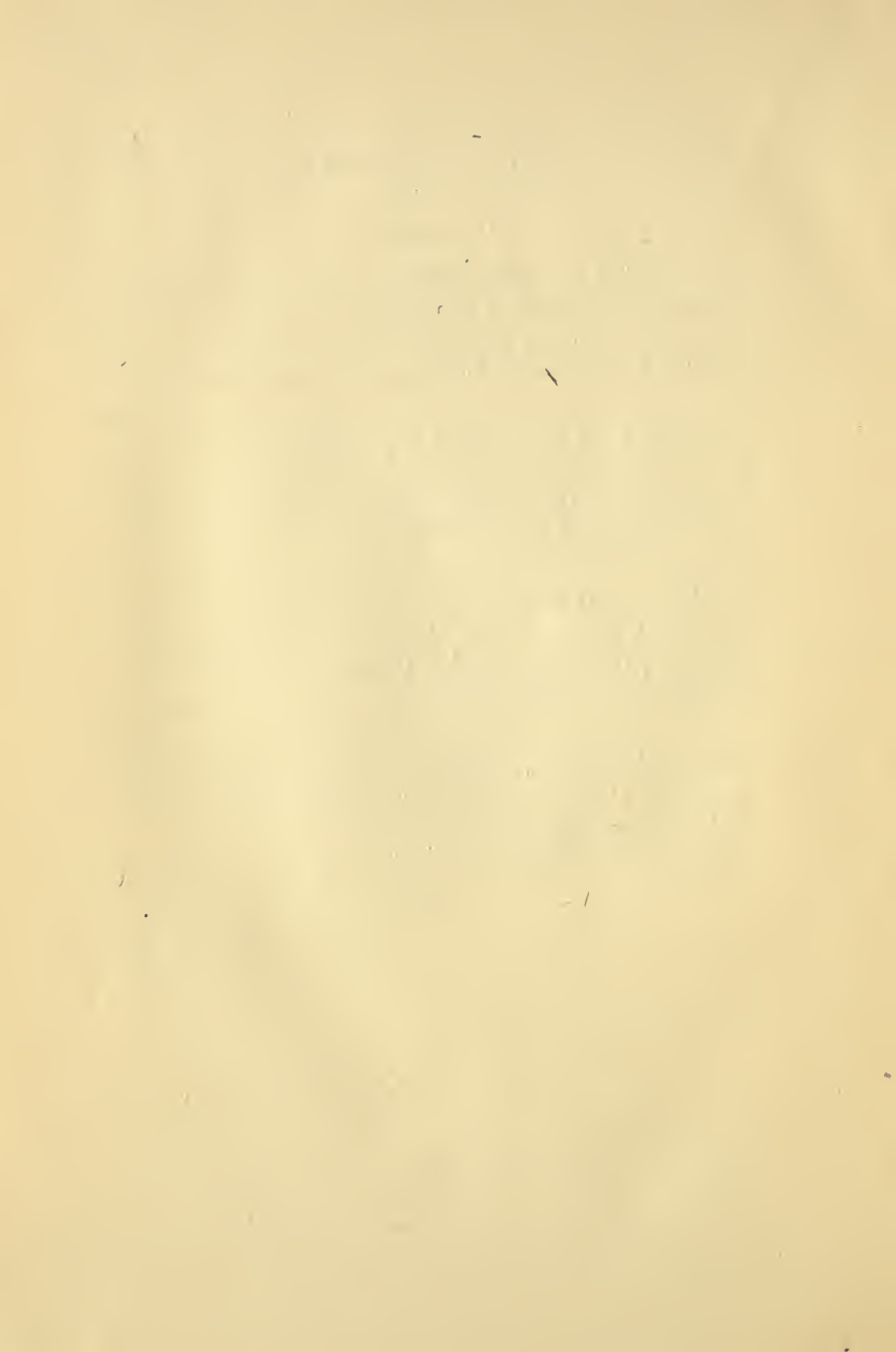
BIOGRAPHY

Cramouni fled the tedious days,
his thought divagous as a cloud,
the egg-eyed women in their stays
playing the violins too loud.

Withdrew his feet, entwined with these,
grass of the sense, and climbed the air
blotting the brain's cacophonies
and cooling the hot roots of his hair . . .

Cramouni must enucleate
the marish path, he brunts the storm.
He gains the end, he makes the gate
into the palace bright and warm.

"Forward!" sings Cramouni's heart;
he plucks at the marsh-mist on his eyes . . .
"Here among beauty I am part . . ."
he gurgles . . . and Cramouni dies.



The Little Generation

THE LITTLE GENERAION

I have sought always the inert enemy.

Hardest to arouse . . .

I say, therefore, to the generation that ruled in my youth

And still pleads for burial,

"My father was born of the masters,

And followed a rabble-man."

He is anathema to me—

I will not follow him

Nor be of his teachings.

I will defy his aims.

So be it to all scorers of themselves,

Ashamed of their own blood;

To those who fear the face of themselves,

In their offspring.

I speak over the head of my father

To the men who were his fathers. . . .

A race is an inheritance greater than money.

A race is a temple built of the sweat of many workmen,

Indestructible, thrusting its sinews into the rock.

Against him who sells himself, his race will rise like many
stones.

His days will be solitary.

Accursed be the fathers of this age,

Who have given absolution to the usurers.

Masters we were and masters we shall be.

The slaves of a crucifier are not of my line—

I say unto you, ye fathers of my flesh, I am the true son
of your best.

Not of your latest.

I recognize no cowardly generations—

I live serene, the fair face of poverty whispering to me
the nobility of my blood.

I am the untrue. . . . if the truth of them that shout
loudly be contemptible.

I am faithless . . . if faith have a price.

I deny failures

For in a gutter I should still be a king.

Shall I rule?

I have ruled myself.

I shall rule the aspects of the sky, watching the white
moon make its entry into dusk, and I shall tell
certain things to women they may not forget.

I shall rule the steel gray pools of dawn, and the many
troubled writings of the sea, as they pass in my
imagination,

And going away, I shall forget the sea in my old pleasure
at the many-faced stupidity of men.

I love the bearded ones, when they are unwise and
drunken,

When they expose to me the bones that have whitened
upon their beaches.

I love witty profound seekers, who reign in the shadow
of life's gateways and deny the necessity of the
sun.

I storm not against doors, knowing that their iron feet will
one day march upon me, and that the steel of my
flesh and my soul will fling them aside.

Who wearies of the unalterable weariness of life?

Life, weary or unweary, is nothing to him

Who initiates.

I interest myself, being infinite in to-morrows. . . .

Let them come—

Doubts and foolishness,
Ennui, the great enemy.
Even the desolation of my gods I could endure
So long as I lie in the mornings
Listening to the promises of my body.
Let the Greeks scoff, Odysseus and Helen;
They shall find in us a new metal
Which was not forged in their day. . . .
Upon the proud abdomen of many a strong woman
Were we forged into clean surfaces. . . .
I shrink from propinquity,
For it is propinquity alone,
That has betrayed me. . . .
Nevertheless only in watchfulness could I survive,
And only in the treachery of others,
Could I look into my face.



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